

AMBASSADOR DIEGO C. ASENCIO

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: September 11, 1986

Copyright 1998 ADST

Subject: "Movement of Peoples and Consular Affairs as Elements in American Foreign Policy Operations: Certain Domestic Aspects of These Subjects"

Q: Diego Asencio recently retired as U.S. Ambassador to Brazil. He is a career Foreign Service officer. The interview will concentrate on the period that he was Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. I should add that I have served under Ambassador Asencio, both indirectly, when I was consul general in Naples during the 1980-81 period, and directly as the Bureau of Consular Affairs' sole liaison officer of immigration and nationality central office in 1982- 1983.

Diego, when did you enter the Foreign Service?

ASENCIO: Let's see. I got in in February 27, 1957.

Q: In your first assignments, did you have the lot of the normal Foreign Service and have any visa assignments?

ASENCIO: No. As a matter of fact, I had a curious and peculiar career, in the sense that my first tour was in Washington, and I worked for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Then I was sent to Mexico, where, presumably, that was to be my destiny. I was part of a program called the World Language Training Replacement Officer Program. There was a Spanish language school in Mexico, and I was supposed to be replacing the consular officers as they came off line, to take Spanish.

Q: You were sort of a repo-depo, as they say?

ASENCIO: Exactly. However, when I arrived in Mexico City, the consular section had somewhat of a crisis in the protection and welfare unit, in the sense that they had just lost an experienced old-timer, who had held the place together for about 16 years, and were in the midst of a peak season and were badly in need of Spanish language officers. So I stayed in that particular job for practically three and a half years, and never did get near the visa line.

Q: In your time, before you became Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, had you picked up any thoughts by talking to fellow Foreign Service officers and others about what was good, what was bad about the way visa operations were run, and things that you felt that you wanted to do about them?

ASENCIO: I'd always had an interest in immigration matters, of course, essentially because I had been born abroad. While my father was an American citizen, which facilitated my acquiring American citizenship, nevertheless, I did have that sort of new immigrant type environment in which I grew up. I grew up in a community that was, in fact, a community of immigrants.

Q: Where were you born, and how did you come over?

ASENCIO: I was born in the province of Almadia, in southern Spain, and I left there when I was six months old to join my father in the United States. I was raised in New Jersey, mostly in the northern and northeastern corners of the state, and for most of the time in the city of Newark. The section of Newark I grew up in was this particular community, which traditionally had been a melting pot area.

Q: What sort of unstated goals did you have when you came to the assistant secretaryship?

ASENCIO: As I said, I had extensive Foreign Service experience, and obviously part of that had to be consular related, in the sense that one cannot arrive at the position either of a section chief or a deputy chief position or an ambassadorship without having some knowledge either from the administrative standpoint or directly about the influence, the impact, the problems of a visa section, for instance. I saw, in my experience, the visa section, in many ways, as a tool, because my career had essentially been in the political field, and obviously I was often approached for assistance for people seeking visas, people seeking visas for people. I often obviously used the visa as a representational tool to some effect. I also had, in fact, the sort of bicultural or cultural relativistic approach with regard to the immigration tradition of the United States, so, in effect, coming out of that particular background, I feel I had a special sympathy for immigrants and was interested in the changes in the immigration law. Of course, having spent three and a half years as a protection officer and dealing with foreign societies, Mexico, in that particular instance, again, I think I acquired a particular affinity or feel for the consular business.

Q: Coming down to the period when you were appointed to the position of assistant secretary, what lay behind that? Was it a routine assignment? Was this one you wanted?

ASENCIO: It was hardly routine, and it was one that I had, in fact, volunteered for. But it came about in a rather unusual way. Essentially, when I was ambassador to Colombia, as you know, I was captured and held hostage for about 61 days. It had been the tradition in the Foreign Service, up until that time-I think one could verify this historically-that ambassadors or officers who got caught up in situations like this invariably suffered in their career. They either were retired or shuffled off to stack paperclips or in some other way taken out of the mainstream.

Since, indeed, in this modern day and age, this particular type of occurrence become rather commonplace, I think there was, in fact, a conscious desire on the part of the department to change this and to, in fact, reward those who presumably withstood whatever the pressures or problems were in a hostage type situation. So, in fact, I returned to the United States to a hero's welcome. Air Force One was sent down to Miami to pick me up after I was released in Havana and taken from Havana to Homestead Air Base. Aboard Air Force One was the Director, General of the Foreign Service, the Director of Protocol, a number of other officers, the Acting Assistant Secretary for Latin America, and the director general sidled up to me and said, "There are a number of posts open. Which one would you like?"

As I recall, there were a number of ambassadorships open, and there were a couple of assistant secretary slots open. It struck me that this particular slot was one in which I had an interest and one in which I thought I could be helpful. I thought I could continue, I guess, the Foreign Service tradition of service. Some of the other slots were in areas that were more politically oriented and tied closer to perhaps what one could call transient policies of the administration at that time. So I felt that this area was one in which I could really make a contribution and do so in an area that was of direct interest to me.

Q: Were you, looking back on it, the first regular Foreign Service officer to have that position that you can think of?

ASENCIO: I guess, certainly, since it became a bureau or an assistant secretaryship.

Q: Because, looking back, usually it had seemed to revolve around people who had a particular ethnic tie outside, as a payoff to an ethnic group, rather than looking for somebody for credentials.

ASENCIO: I think there's probably something to that, the fact that I was the first professional.

Q: Could you tell me a little about what were the responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, particularly as they pertained to the movement of peoples?

ASENCIO: With regard to the movement of peoples, the first thing I encountered, of course, was the fact that there was a seat on the Select Committee on Immigration and Refugee Reform, headed at that time by Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame, that was, in fact, the seat of the Secretary of State. By, I guess, whatever osmosis occurs in the policy area of the Department of State, this was mine.

Traditionally, the consular business at the Department of State has essentially suffered a sort of second-class status, in the sense that there has always been an attempt to not have to deal with these subjects at the higher policy levels, unless absolutely necessary. This was certainly made clear to me, in the sense that the staffers on the seventh floor made very plain that if, in fact, the seventh floor of the Secretary or any of the senior officers around the Secretary would have to deal with any of the issues that were within my jurisdiction, including the movement of peoples, that they would consider that I had "failed" and was not doing my job.

Q: I might add here that the seventh floor is the jargon for the seat of the Secretary of State and his principal assistants.

ASENCIO: That's right. On the other hand, there was the positive aspect, and that was that insofar as I did not do anything really off-the-wall, as far as the Secretary and the senior officers around him were concerned, anything that I wanted to do in this area was just hunky-dory with them.

Q: This seems to be very much the way running the consular section is in an embassy: the fewer problems that come to the top, the better.

ASENCIO: Of course, I've always lectured new ambassadors going out on the subject, and warned them, first of all, that if one neglected to provide an appropriate oversight to a consular section, it was the area most likely to bite them on the rump as they went along, so I advised them to take care. I also, of course, told them that they were, in fact, neglecting a precious tool, perhaps the only resource they had at the embassy that was in demand, in any sort of demand at all, in the whole society to which they were assigned.

Q: This is because of the visa function.

ASENCIO: Of course. Essentially, Father Hesburgh's group, which was one of those very closely balanced commissions, that is, you had people from the Congress, you had people from the executive, all from areas of jurisdiction, with regard to the movements of people, you had representatives of ethnic groups, you had representatives, for instance, of labor. It was a rather interesting group, actually, and one worthy of study on the fine art of how to put together a committee that would represent a broad range of societal interests.

Q: What was the instigating force behind this select commission?

ASENCIO: There were a couple of factors. One is, I think, everybody was prepared to admit, even the supporters of the Immigration Act, were prepared to admit that, essentially, it was an anachronism, an act that, in its complexity and in the length of time that it stood without change, was worthy of reform, worthy of amendment, worthy of reconsideration, and that we had one particular and peculiar circumstance in recent times that was troubling the society in general, certainly those who were specialists in the area, and that was the large movements of clandestine immigration, people coming into the United States either without a visa, that is, crossing the border clandestinely, or overstaying temporary visas, or in some other way, through false documentation, or what have you, coming into the United States with the intention of remaining permanently, acquiring jobs, and making a home in our society. According to the estimates at the time, of course, it's very difficult to give estimates of the clandestine phenomenon, but the estimates ranged anywhere from 6-12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, and there were also, I think, rather startling estimates, again, not particularly supported by any documentation, that they were coming in at the rate of about 1 million a year. So one then had a vision of large numbers of illegal immigrants entering our society, acquiring jobs. The popular political connotation, of course, at that particular time, was the time of economic problem, was that these people were, in fact, taking jobs away from residents and American citizens, and there were those who felt that, in fact, by the very weight of numbers, they were changing the very nature, character, and identity of the United States, mostly in terms of a sort of an Hispanic caste. Others who merely felt that the fact that the law was being violated in such a wholesale way was, per se, something worthy of attention. Then, of course, there were a number of other people who felt that the very weight of those numbers were creating a sort of political subgroup that, because it could not defend itself, because to defend itself would, in fact, announce its presence, were subject to exploitation and were, in some numbers, actually being exploited, and this concerned a number of us that that sort of situation should exist in this day and age in the United States.

Of course, there was the other side, too. We were dealing, in fact, with an anachronism. As you know, it's against the law to come into the United States illegally; it's against the law to help somebody come into the United States illegally; it's against the law to house, feed, clothe, or do anything with someone who comes into the United States illegally. It is not against the law to hire them. This is the so-called Texas Proviso, and it's something from our past history developed as a SOP, I would say, to the agricultural areas of the border states, as a means of providing the possibility of plentiful and cheap labor at harvest time. But as an anachronism, it remained. So you had a situation where these large numbers of people, who presumably had to pass a number of obstacles to get into the United States, once they were here, had absolutely no problem in acquiring employment.

Q: On this commission as a vet, you stood in the place of the Secretary of State.

ASENCIO: That's correct.

Q: Did the various members speak particularly to their expertise or their area of interest, or did you feel that you could speak on anything you wished?

ASENCIO: It was quite informal, in a sense, although it was structured. The give-and-take was quite lively. There were grand arguments, speeches made by politicians, impassioned pleas for one group or another, very tough arguments concerning arcane points of interest only to a limited group. It was a real microcosm, I guess, of that sector of official and private society interested in the movement of peoples.

Q: In the State Department, there were some significant foreign policy issues involved, weren't there, in any restructuring of the immigrant visa system? I'm thinking of the Helsinki accords and the impact on certain countries.

ASENCIO: I kept saying that, yes. I'm not sure I convinced anyone. You sound like one of my old speeches.

Q: What were the foreign policy considerations that you felt?

ASENCIO: The one that was most obvious to me was, you had a situation where one of our neighbors, in fact, was providing the bulk of the clandestine immigration, and this was a situation presumably-I'm referring to Mexico, of course. Obviously, some people had theories about the so-called escape valve, that having this opportunity was a benefit to everybody concerned, because otherwise, the excess population would accumulate in Mexico way beyond any capacity they may have to create new jobs, and that you were then, if you shut this off, you would, in fact, be creating a sort of proto-revolutionary situation there, and you would have substantial instability in a society very, very close to the United States, that would have to impact on us automatically.

Q: You were talking at that time, when the Mexican economy was probably at its best, weren't you?

ASENCIO: It was the period when they first discovered the oil, when they first determined that they had substantial reserves, but it was not yet the period when the revenues had really begun to flow. It was a period of some expectation.

Q: More expectation than actual...

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: What was the final result of the committee, regarding...

ASENCIO: Let me finish a thought. You also had, of course, substantial immigration from the Caribbean islands, and these were areas that, because of their size and their nature, of course, have always been economic basket cases, and where, because of the instability of some of the governments, their one economic benefit, the sun, and the exploitation of tourism, would often go by the board. So where there had, in fact, been a longstanding tradition of the escape valve, or of immigration to the United States, as at least a stabilizing factor, and it accelerated from time to time.

Then, of course, you had the factor of Cuba and its contribution to the movement of peoples, which has been substantial over the last couple of decades. And, of course, Haiti. You had the curious impact, particularly on those societies like the state of Florida, that were sort of in the entry area of the gateway from the Caribbean to the United States, and the fact that substantial numbers of Cubans, Haitians, and other Latin Americans, have settled in the southern Florida area. So these were all significant impacts that I would consider foreign policy impacts, but obviously those also with a strong domestic impact.

Q: How did the commission resolve, satisfactorily or not, in regard to the almost overwhelming problem of the illegal migration coming from both Mexico and the Caribbean?

ASENCIO: Essentially, the commission decided, I would say, after much debate, that we were not in a position, first of all, to locate the clandestine immigrants that were here in our sort of legal system, that we were not equipped bureaucratically to find these clandestine immigrants, that this would be both onerous and expensive, and probably a task that would be politically unacceptable in our society. So then you had a couple of different issues: one, what would you do with the people that were already here? There was the other aspect, and that is: how would you set up a system? Again, no one really believed that it would be possible to hermetically seal the border. First of all, we're talking-I forget what-3,000 miles or 2,700 miles? Even if you use all of the law enforcement capability available in the area, there was one theory, even if you used all of the armed forces, you still would not be able to adequately patrol the border. That was begging the question, because if, in fact, you did have that capability, the economic and social impact on the area would be so overwhelming and so irresistible, that it would be impossible to engage in an exercise that, in effect, closed the border for any length of time. The legal movements of people would be affected; the legal movements of goods; the economic movements in the area would also be impacted and would have repercussions, both political, economic, and social, that would be unbearable for any government in any society.

So we looked for some other way, some way that, in fact, would not be repressive, would not require the applications of force, would be relatively simple, and we focused on the Texas Proviso and the possibility of repealing this, and of, in fact, developing a system of sanctions to enforce the repeal of the Proviso. What I'm talking about, of course, is the idea of making it illegal to hire an illegal alien, not really a startling concept, it would seem to me. As I say, it would have been the elimination of, in fact, an anachronism, something that many of us considered a political obscenity that had outlived any possible and potential usefulness. The development of the system whereby the employers would be charged with determining whether the people that they were hiring were entitled to be hired, whether they were, in fact, residents or American citizens, and there were various schemes discussed as to how one did this. Then, of course, there was a system of fines developed for those who would persist in violating the law. However, the backdrop of consideration on the part of the group was that we still are a society of laws, and the very fact that the Texas Proviso would be repealed would be sufficient to ensure that there would be substantial compliance with the law, and that the enforcement aspect would necessarily be limited to perhaps that 3-4% that would persist, regardless of the law, and that this was felt to be a tolerable limit and one that could be managed relatively easily.

Q: It was felt, then, that it was the pull of jobs, rather than just getting into the United States as the main determiner?

ASENCIO: That's correct. Yes, it was felt that the possibility of employment in the United States was, in fact, the magnet that was attracting the large-scale clandestine immigration.

Q: In this, were you getting any signals from-let's see, if I recall, this was all during the Carter Administration that it came out? The report was issued to Reagan.

ASENCIO: The Select Committee actually was appointed and met during the Carter Administration. It was, however, a bipartisan group, and it, in fact, continued to exist and meet under Reagan and did deliver its report to the Reagan Administration.

Q: What was the direction or the interest shown by the Carter Administration, other than creating the commission? Or was there any interest at all in what was going on?

ASENCIO: It would be rather difficult for me to say, because, obviously, I took over in the consular bureau in September. The elections were in November, and, of course, we had a new crowd in January.

Q: The commission published its report, I think, in March of '81, which would be the time that the Reagan Administration was just beginning to take over.

ASENCIO: That's right.

Q: Did you get any feedback from the new administration, from the Secretary of State?

ASENCIO: Oh, definitely. Definitely. As a matter of fact, the Secretary of State, again, essentially was a passive participant.

Q: This was Alexander Haig at that time.

ASENCIO: That's correct. He did participate in some of the Cabinet meetings on this subject, but, essentially, except for sort of a watching brief, did not really participate in the elaboration of policy. For instance, I had no really discussions with him on this subject that I would consider direction or requests even for information. I did have a couple of meetings with him to discuss various aspects that were costly, however, briefing meetings. I was telling him things for him to know what we were up to, so that when he met with his peers, he would be informed.

Q: This Select Commission report represents—we're speaking now in 1986, but represents the guts of what has been called the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, the Simpson-Rodino Bill, a series of bills which are still being considered by Congress and may be considered into the far future for a new immigration law. But the fact that you didn't have much consultation from the Secretary of State because he was obviously busy with other things, but, at the same time, wasn't very interested, does this mean a lack of interest at the top of the administration, or immigration reform a fairly low priority?

ASENCIO: I wouldn't say that at all, because the point man in the administration for immigration reform was not the Secretary of State, but rather the Attorney General, at that time, William French Smith. There was a deputy to the current Secretary of the Treasury, whatever Baker it was, an assistant to Baker, who, curiously, was an ex-Foreign Service officer, Frank Hodsoll, who was, in fact, the point man within the White House on this subject. I think despite the fact that at least on the seventh floor of the department there was limited interest in this, there was a considerable amount of interest within the administration, and the Attorney General put together a task force, in fact, called the Attorney General's Task Force on Immigration, that then deliberated on the report of Father Hesburgh's Select Committee, and decided what elements of the Select Committee report were tenable as administration objectives. Of course, I was a member of that task force, and we met regularly, debated strongly. I don't mean to imply that having a lack of interest on the seventh floor was necessarily an obstacle, in the sense that, again, what it did for me personally was give me a pretty free hand in determining what the Department of State's stand should be. In fact, I emerged as the department's spokesman on this area. I testified easily once a month on this subject before Congress, became a national spokesman on the subject, in the sense that I was sent out to speak on the subject all over the United States and, of course, participated very directly, through the task force, on the presentation of the administration's positions, did attend the Cabinet meetings on the subject there with the Secretary of State. I don't mean to imply that he was not informed; he obviously was, because I had to keep him informed for him to be able to participate gainfully in the Cabinet meetings.

Then, of course, we also had direct and cooperative links with the various committees of the Congress that were working on this subject. So the Department of State, I believe, participated fully in the elaboration of immigration policy. However, it was not something that was within the direct radar scope of the Secretary of State and within the administration. The guidance was essentially coming out of the Attorney General's task force.

Q: One other factor that was mentioned to me, in talking to B.J. Harper, your visa expert.

ASENCIO: Advisor.

Q: Advisor. She said that there was a problem that one had to consider on any new legislation, and that was the Helsinki accords. Would you care to comment on that?

ASENCIO: I'm not sure. I wouldn't give it the prominence that she apparently gave it to you. Obviously, the Helsinki accords were part of the consideration, in terms of the deliberations of the Congress, but I would say the obvious focal point on the part of the administration and on the part of the Congress refers specifically to the domestic implications of the flow of clandestine immigration, the impact of clandestine immigration on the United States. The foreign policy aspects were, if anything, considered, but secondary.

Q: Both the U.S. Civil Service Commission report, Arthur Fleming's, and the Select Commission's, talk about developing better bilateral international relations with other countries, but specifically, naturally, Mexico. You developed some contacts with Mexican authorities on this. Could you talk about those a bit?

ASENCIO: Essentially, I was of the opinion that it would be necessary to have the cooperation of the Mexican Government in order to really bring this sort of problem under any semblance of control at all, that, in fact, since our consular establishments in Mexico amounted to something like a fourth of our overall consular budget, it behooved us to pay particular attention to modernizing the consular facility in Mexico, because the resources applied were enormous. One only has to go to our embassy in Mexico City any morning and look at the line-up of people who have come to apply for a visa, and those are the legals, those are those who presumably have some possibility of the acquisition of a legal visa. If one also goes up to the Rio Grande and sits there in the middle of the night, you'll see the illegals streaming across. So this is, I think, a magnum problem for both societies.

So, therefore, I approached the Mexican Government, first of all, with the idea in mind of the possibility of developing a modernized, cooperative consular system between the two societies and, second of all, enlisting their support for whatever measures we could take to control immigration along the borders.

Q: What was the Mexican response to this?

ASENCIO: Essentially, their response was that it was our problem on the question of control of the border. It was our problem, and they saw no particular need in any number of arguments against their becoming involved in it. They really saw absolutely no advantage from their standpoint in any sort of arrangement where they would wind up having to control their own people and be blamed by us for not being able to attain any particular given standard. So they were very chary about anything that would get them involved and put them in such a posture. They, of course, reserved the right to criticize any of the segments of the law that were up for consideration, and they did on many occasions. We also engaged in a number of both private and public debates with Mexican officials and Mexican scholars on the subject of movements of people. But we, in fact, had set up within the mechanism that existed for bilateral consultation between the Mexican Government and the U.S. Government, which was through the channel of the foreign ministry and the Department of State. We set up a special group to consider consular matters, and we met essentially once a year during my tenure as assistant secretary to discuss these subjects.

Q: Was this helpful?

ASENCIO: Well, we didn't achieve any of our objectives, so, in that sense, one would have to consider it a failure. However, I think we attenuated some of the problems, and we obviously did have a cooperative mechanism going. We, I think, perhaps contributed to a sense of cooperation between the two governments of the two societies.

Q: Speaking about relations with, you might say, foreign-and in this particular instance, if not hostile, not very friendly powers, how did you view your relations with that other power in our own government, the Immigration and Naturalization Service?

ASENCIO: I didn't have any particular problems with them. I got along well with the officials of that service. I think that in many cases they were used as scapegoats for situations over which they had no control, and my own basic thesis was that we had a sloppy immigration system and a difficult immigration law that was so susceptible to manipulation and violation, because the society considered such a thing desirable, or at least segments of the society considered it desirable, and that, if, in fact, there was any sort of political or popular support for any other system, that system would evolve. So it didn't make any sense to use the Commissioner of Immigration as a scapegoat. I really considered him a colleague at that time. We would often wind up sitting at the same table testifying before the same people.

Q: What did you think about the system that's built into the law, which does strike one as being somewhat awkward, in that a visa officer of the Department of State issues a visa overseas or in a foreign country, anyway, and an immigration officer at the board of entry decides whether he's going to accept that officer. It's sort of a two-key system.

ASENCIO: Obviously it is redundant, but, again, this is law and obviously was considered a two-step check system that I always accepted as a given. I would not, perhaps, have instituted such a system if I had the opportunity to, in fact, revise the system, but I, for instance, detected no particular ground swell within the Select Committee to change the system, and neither the Senate nor the House judiciary committees were inclined to do so. That was not the position of the administration, so I just accepted it as the way things were.

Q: Looking at it maybe more on a theoretical level, many of the countries-I'd say, probably almost all the countries, except the United States and Canada, a large inflow of immigration, have immigration officers overseas-Canada and Australia are the ones I think of offhand. Do you think this would make sense?

ASENCIO: To have immigration officers overseas?

Q: Rather than consular officers or State Department officers.

ASENCIO: I'm of that particular tradition in the Foreign Service that says that one of the problems of the Foreign Service-and I'm speaking here, obviously, parochially, as a Foreign Service officer-has been that over the years, it has slowly ceded its jurisdiction over any number of things abroad. The number of other Foreign Services have proliferated. At one point, the Foreign Service was, in fact, the single service overseas dealing with matters foreign. We now have foreign services in the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, the FAA, the Department of Defense.

Q: The FBI.

ASENCIO: You name it. Everybody had his own foreign service. I, from a purely sort of career-oriented standpoint, think that that is a disaster. And from the standpoint of the U.S. Government, from the standpoint of the national interest, I do not necessarily consider it desirable. So there were sort of discussions or initiatives going on at that time as to just exactly how one would develop a non-redundant system. That never got very far, but I always deflected them rather easily by saying, "Perhaps we should do it the other way, and we'd be happy to absorb the immigration system within the consular bureau."

Q: Looking from your position in charge of the immigration process in the State Department, from my point of view, it has always seemed that there has been one consistent policy in the State Department personnel system for a historical period, and that is that immigration work is considered not to be the most desirable, and there has been a channeling of substandard officers or officers who haven't fitted into the system as easily, into visa work. So you do have a problem in our system. The visa officer is looked down upon, and many of their decisions may result because not the best officers are dealing with it.

ASENCIO: I'm not sure that I would agree with that entirely, Stu. I think, for instance, there is a problem, but it is not at that entry-point level. What I would say, for instance, is that, generally, it would seem to me, across the board, you have on the visa line the youngsters, the new entrants, those who've come into the system. My experience as assistant secretary, in wandering all over the world, having consular conferences and talking to these youngsters, is that they were really excellent. I mean, in many cases, they were much more impressive than some of our middle-grade officers. There was no question that we had quality folks out on that visa line. What would happen is that the really promising ones, the ones that really looked the best, would be creamed off. So I think what you had was a situation where at least the consular aspect of the business is the beneficiary of the new talent as it comes in. It's probably dependent on the use of that new talent, to a great extent, to do business, but then loses people that could usefully become middle-grade or senior officers on the consular side. That is where I fought some rather hard-fought battles with the system, in the sense that I thought that, first of all, there's no question that in the Foreign Service, consular officers are considered to sort of be in trade and not really be gentlemen. Therefore, if you were really part of the elite section of an elite group, you were either a political officer or marginally an economic officer, but you certainly weren't a consular officer, and not even an administrative officer, for that matter. So you had that basic feeling, and that was learned very quickly.

I discovered, for instance, I would meet with all of the new classes of the basic officer course, and usually, probably, within their first week of activity, they had already heard the story by the time they hit my office. I, for instance, had a delightful time storming some of the offices of the seventh floor, usually selecting those filled by professionals, of course, and saying, "Goddamn it, I heard about your lecture over at the Institute, and you badmouthed the consular service, and I want you to stop doing that."

Q: I know that one of the dirtiest words in a consular officer's vocabulary is "substantive."

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: Because substantive work is either, say, political or marginally economic, but certainly not consular. Were you able to even change that use of that word and the thought behind it?

ASENCIO: I certainly charged up that hill. I don't know whether I had a lasting effect. For instance, part of what I did was to try to imbue the bureau with a certain spirit, and some of this was contrived-us against them, and, by golly, we were doing an important and difficult job, and we were not to take any nonsense from anyone. We were to, in fact, hold our own, because what we were doing was dealing, as I said, with the very nature, character, and identity of the United States, and this was not something to be taken lightly. If there was any substance, this is where it was. This had some effect.

I recall that there was a staff meeting, or a meeting to discuss some particular subject in one of the geographic bureaus, and there was a representative of the consular bureau at that meeting who raised a particular subject, and the chairman of the meeting said that he wanted to discuss the substantive matters before discussing other things that might be tangentially related. The bureau representative took some umbrage. In fact, I understand he threatened the chairman with bodily harm. The chairman called me and was somewhat surprised at the reaction of my officer. I asked him to explain what had happened, and this fellow explained that when he said this, this other fellow just shot out of the chair and reached for his lapels. I said, "Did he actually hit you?"

The fellow said, "No, of course not." I said, "Well, we'll have to reprimand him." So we had somewhat of an impact, I think, in that regard. Also, we waved that banner substantially that, in effect, something that had this amount of domestic impact was obviously a matter of importance, and something that could affect our relations with Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean, was obviously of substance.

There was another aspect that I was flogging at the time and that I still am, as a matter of fact, in my current incarnation, and that was that as far as dealings with the U.S. public, when an American had any dealings at all with the Department of State, it was usually through the consular end of the business. He was either getting a passport, or he was being aided in difficulties abroad, or he was bringing a relative from some country. So their only link, their only-I hate the word, but their only interface with the Department of State was through consular services. It struck me that one of the things that the Foreign Service has always lacked, this is what everybody says, is a constituency, and that if, in fact, one wanted to build a constituency-and by "constituency," read "political support"- one did this through the services that were being rendered by the consular service, and not by the sort of great abstract thoughts that were being developed by political and economic officers, and particularly their service abroad, which might have some impact on the conduct of foreign policy, but obviously did not impact on the American public per se. Once you get beyond the beltway, it's very difficult to find people who know what the Foreign Service is, who have heard of it. Or if they have heard of it, they've heard some sort of pejorative cookie-pusher, striped- pants thing.

Q: I have been working on a history of the old consular service and looking at, also, my 30-odd years as a consular officer. One thing has become very clear to me, and that is, you speak of constituencies. Unlike, really, the rest of the State Department, the consular service has a constituency, really, within Congress. Congress is far more interested in what we can do for them than any of the other branches. There's a natural alliance between Congress and the consular service as opposed to the rest of the State Department.

Looking, again, back on the history of the service, which goes back to 1776, there really have been only three people that I can think of who have really been able to use this. One was Wilbur Carr, from the 1890s to the 1920s, who created the modern professional consular service. Then there was a long hiatus until Barbara Watson came in, who reinvigorated the service. Then you came along. I will speak as objectively as I can. Normally, when that office is treated as a bureaucratic bureau, to be run, period, without using this congressional connection and also the force of personality to make the consuls feel loved and wanted and doing something proper, I have the feeling it sinks very rapidly into an unhappy and not a very effective organization.

ASENCIO: I don't want to take any special credit for that. I mean, there is no question that as a result of being thrust into the Simpson-Mazzoli discussion, I spent an awful lot of time up on the Hill, and I enjoyed the give-and-take that one has with Congress. I do consider that an important element in representing the Department of State. I think, in effect, there was that aspect, and there's no question that I also enjoyed the kind of comparing myself to the problems that some of my colleagues had in arguing for things like budgets. For instance, every time you go up to consider a budget, immediately the Congress begins to try to cut you back, no matter what sort of budget you've presented, and you wind up defending the appropriateness of a particular program. I would not take that tack; I would say, "Congressman, if you give me what I'm asking for, I will make money for the U.S. Treasury. If you cut me back, I will not only have to limit the services I am providing to your constituents, but I will also provide less money for the treasury. So what do you think of them there apples?" This would sort of throw them into a quandary. I very rarely lost that type of battle. The only time I would really lose would be when, in fact, you had one of those horrible situations where everybody had to take a 10% cut, or whatever it was, across the board.

For instance, I recall a delightful conversation I had with Secretary of State Muskie. He called me in and said, "You know, I've just been talking to my budget people, and there was this particular situation where we decided to make a cut of 250 positions based on the potential passage of certain legislation that would assist the Foreign Service." This was the so-called Visa Waiver Bill. "The bill didn't pass, but the Bureau of the Budget cut the 250 positions, and I'm going to have to take them out of your consular system. So I'm calling you here to work with us to determine which cuts we should make."

I said, "Fine. Tell me, would you like me to cut London? Paris? Rome? Madrid? Mexico City? You just tell me, and I'll be happy to close the door."

He said, "No, no. We're not talking about that. We're talking about working out cuts in the system, where you can still continue to do your work."

I said, "Hey, go right ahead, you know. Cut it wherever you like, and you just let me know, and I'll be happy to stop that particular operation." Then, of course, "You want me to take the cuts out of the passport system and issue less passports? I'll be happy to do that. You want me not to get people out of jail? You just tell me." Of course, this turned into an all-day debate, and eventually, much to the chagrin of my colleagues, they took the 250 out of the rest of the department. So there's no question that we had an advantage, in the sense that what we were doing was quantifiable and was, in fact, something that could be seen and was, in fact, a service for American constituents and, therefore, was fairly easy to defend.

It sometimes worked the other way, too. For instance, in battles between the administration and the Congress over the budget, where, in fact, Congress would not approve a budget, and the U.S. Government would run out of money, the first thing that the White House would order closed would be passport offices. In fact, we had almost a sort of overt situation, where when people showed up, they were sort of told, "We closed this office because the U.S. Government has run out of money, and we haven't gotten our appropriations through the Congress." One was then in a situation of, in fact, creating pressure to shake loose the budget, or at least to shake loose the continued resolution.

Q: We appreciate the talk, and we may come back again.

ASENCIO: Very good.

End of interview